

“Were You There?” Sermon Series  
Sermon #3 – Judas  
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It’s always been a popular idea to give your child a biblical name. Did you know that our associate minister has three brothers named Matthew, Mark, and Luke? I guess Tim’s parents didn’t want to seem too religious by naming him John, so he’s Timothy. Some of the most popular biblical names are those of the disciples. Think about: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Phillip, Thomas, Matthew. I bet we all know a Simon, and probably even a Thaddeus and a Bart. If Leigh and I had a boy, we were considering naming him Matthias, which is the name of the 13<sup>th</sup> disciple who was appointed in Acts.

But how many Judases do you know? How many social situations have you been in where that name comes up? “Kory, I’d like you to meet Tom, Matt, and Judas.” Oh. How unfortunate. No one names their child Judas these days, because that name is associated with one of the most reviled characters in all of history, Judas Iscariot.

I find his universal condemnation to be a bit odd, actually. Judas did not accuse, try, condemn, sentence, mock, or spit upon Jesus. He didn’t put a whip to his back or a nail through his hands. And yet, he is often thought of as the essence of evil in this story. I guess anyone could have done those other things, but only a friend could betray, and betrayal is a most personal offense. No one attended Benedict Arnold Elementary School, and no one names their kid Judas.

Judas is a complex character in this drama who can’t be painted with a broad brush. He’s been portrayed a variety of ways, from heinous villain to unfortunate victim. I remember the first time I saw “Jesus Christ Superstar” I was shocked at how sympathetic a portrayal Judas was given. I always assumed he was an unfeeling opportunist looking to make a quick buck. But there’s more to Judas than meets the eye.

We don’t know a lot about him. The gospels don’t tell us about how or when he was called to follow Jesus, so we can only assume it was with the same enthusiasm and vigor as the others. I doubt Judas would have begun following Jesus with the plan to betray him. He saw Jesus, he believed, and he followed, like the other disciples.

We know that he was chosen to serve as the treasurer for the disciples, so he must have displayed some positive characteristics. This office is not usually given to someone thought of as greedy and irresponsible. It was a respected position and probably indicates the degree of esteem in which he was held. And yet, Judas isn’t even mentioned in Matthew’s gospel until chapter 10, and even in that first mention, he’s not labeled as the money-keeper, but as the one who betrays Jesus.

The burning question for me is, “Why did Judas do it?” In their gospels, Luke and John both say that Satan entered Judas and caused him to do what he did. Some might say that it was all a part of God’s plan and that Judas didn’t have a choice. But that lets Judas off the hook. I don’t believe either God or Satan controlled Judas like a marionette on a string. Do we ever lose our free will, our ability to make our own choices? If we can excuse Judas for his actions, then it becomes easy to make the same excuses for our own. “The devil made me do it.” If Judas didn’t have any choice in what he did, why would he be so grieved about it that he would take his own life? Judas has as much culpability in the Crucifixion as anyone else.

So why did he choose to betray Jesus? There are several theories that exist. The first one says that Judas was greedy and betrayed Jesus for the cash. But that doesn't fit what we know. The amount of money he was given was modest, about the price you would pay for an injured slave, and later he returns the money. Besides, as the treasurer, he could have dipped his hand into the cookie jar anytime he wanted. There's something more at work here besides greed.

Another theory says that Judas was disappointed that Jesus wasn't the military hero the Jews were expected. Judas' surname, Iscariot, may have been taken from the Greek word *sicarrii*, which means "dagger-bearer." This word was also used to describe the group of Zealots who used revolutionary tactics to undermine the Roman authority. Judas may have been looking for Jesus to be the kind of savior who could lead this rebellion. When Judas realized Jesus wasn't that kind of leader, he may have betrayed him out of anger or revenge.

The third theory seems to make the most sense. It says that Judas was not greedy or angry, but instead was actually trying to help Jesus in his mission. He knew from the Old Testament what the Messiah was supposed to do – to vanquish Rome and establish God's kingdom on earth – and he felt Jesus just wasn't moving fast enough. Judas had become disillusioned because Jesus was talking about dying rather than setting up his kingdom. Judas may have thought, "If I can just nudge him a little; if I can just force his hand, then he won't have any choice but to act." I believe Judas did what he did because Jesus was not the Savior Judas wanted him to be.

It's easy for us to feel contempt for Judas. After all, he's Judas, the betrayer. It's easy for us to distance ourselves from him: "How could he do that? I would never do that!" But I believe that anyone, put into the right - or wrong - circumstances, facing the right amount of pressure, is capable of betrayal, even betraying Jesus. The question for us is not if we will betray Jesus in our lives, but when. The power of sin in our lives is too strong for us to resist it forever.

We may be tempted to write off this line of thinking. "The power of sin" may feel like an antiquated phrase, something only said at tent revival meetings, or maybe it carries a lot of negative baggage for you. It may be even harder for you to grasp the concept of Satan entering into someone and influencing their behavior, outside of a horror movie. But Judas reminds us that people can be led by forces beyond themselves that pull them into destruction. We have to be careful about downplaying the role of evil in our world. Like God, there is a mystery about evil that is beyond all human understanding. If Satan opposed Jesus in this story, Satan will oppose Jesus in our story.

Like Judas, we'll never always make the right choices. That's not an excuse for our sins, but it is reality. What we have to be careful of is how we follow up these moments. Matthew tells us that, after his betrayal, Judas was overcome with remorse. That's a good starting point, but it's not the same as repentance. It's one thing to feel badly for what we've done; it's quite another to actively seek forgiveness and reconciliation. Remorse means feelings of regret; repentance is a change of heart. Remorse is saying under your breath, "I shouldn't have done that." Repentance is looking in the eyes of the one you've wronged and saying, "I shouldn't have done that."

Judas never takes that step. After his betrayal, he doesn't return to the community of the disciples, where forgiveness would be found. We need our community the most when we are at our lowest. Judas doesn't realize this. Instead, he suffers alone, increasing

in despair, unwilling to believe he could be forgiven, until his remorse drives him to take his own life.

By doing so, Judas missed the whole point of the crucifixion. Jesus died to liberate us from the power of sin and to offer us forgiveness. And no one – no one – is outside of that realm of forgiveness. No one has fallen so far that they are no longer eligible to receive God's mercy. But to receive it, we have to ask for it. Judas couldn't bring himself to ask for forgiveness, and his life was cut short.

We run the same risk. If we aren't willing to humble ourselves and acknowledge our need for forgiveness, our lives are cut short, not physically, but in its vitality, in the *joie de vivre* we experience of being forgiven and freed through Christ. Part of having faith is believing that we can be forgiven.

Like Judas, we all are tempted to make Jesus into the Christ we want him to be. We want him to give us what we want and heal us when we want and to leave us alone when we want to be left alone to think and do things we don't want him to know about. And when that doesn't happen, when Christ doesn't fit our mold, we get disillusioned, and we make ourselves vulnerable to the forces of evil around us.

Professing faith in Christ means acknowledging that it is not Jesus who can be changed by us, but we who must be changed by him. If only Judas had been open to receiving forgiveness, he would have not only have lived long enough to discover the empty tomb, he would have discovered the joy of living as a follower of the risen Christ. Thankfully, we still have that chance, the chance to open our hearts, the chance to ask for forgiveness, the chance to be changed forever.